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STRENGTHENING OF THE COORDINATION OF HUMANITARIAN AND DISASTER RELIEF ASSISTANCE OF THE UNITED NATIONS, INCLUDING SPECIAL ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE: STRENGTHENING OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND COORDINATION OF EFFORTS TO STUDY, MITIGATE AND MINIMIZE THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE CHERNOBYL DISASTER

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. In its resolution 50/134 of 20 December 1995, the General Assembly, expressing profound concern about the ongoing effects of the Chernobyl disaster on the lives and health of people, particularly children, in the affected areas of Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine, declared 26 April 1996 International Day Commemorating the Tenth Anniversary of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant Accident, and invited Member States to conduct appropriate activities to commemorate that tragic event and to enhance public awareness of the consequences of such disasters for human health and the environment throughout the world. Further, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report on the implementation of resolution 50/134 at its fifty-second session. The present report is submitted in response to that request.

2. The present report describes the action undertaken during the period 1996-1997 by the United Nations and its funds and programmes and other organizations of the United Nations system as well as other entities in order to address the diverse and far-reaching consequences of the accident. It also highlights the findings of the international conferences held in commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the disaster, and those of the inter-agency needs assessment mission which visited the affected areas in 1997. Finally, it presents recommendations for future action to improve, in the long-term, the quality of life of those affected.

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II. INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES

3. Marking the tenth anniversary of the Chernobyl accident on 26 April 1996, a number of initiatives were undertaken with the aim of drawing conclusions concerning the consequences of the accident and assessing the impact of relief action undertaken on both a bilateral and multilateral basis. An international conference on the health consequences of the Chernobyl and other radiological accidents was convened by the World Health Organization (WHO) at Geneva from 20 to 23 November 1995; a conference on the consequences of the Chernobyl accide..., jointly organized by the European Commission and the Governments of the three countries most affected, was held at Minsk from 18 to 22 March 1996. A major international conference on the theme "One decade after Chernobyl: summing up the consequences of the accident", which was co-sponsored by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), WHO and the European Commission, took place at Vienna from 8 to 12 April 1996. That conference was preceded by an international forum on nuclear safety aspects, organized by IAEA and the Department of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, and was held at IAEA headquarters from 1 to 3 April 1996. The forum addressed in particular the remedial measures taken since the accident to improve the safety of Chernobyl-type reactors, of the containment structure built around the destroyed reactor, and of the site itself.

4. The international conference held at Vienna in particular resulted in new and tangible proposals to reduce human suffering and to increase the capacity of Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine to cope with the long-term effects of the accident. The participating organizations and experts presented the results of their research work and the relevant action taken with respect to the activity of radioactive material released; the deposit of this material on the earth and in particular the territories of Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine; the level of radiation doses received by the recovery workers and the population; the clinically observed effects attributable to radiation exposure; the increase in the incidence of thyroid cancer; longer-term health effects (e.g., concerns about leukaemia) and the need to improve cancer and mortality registries; the socio-psychological effects; the environmental consequences for animals, plants, forests, water resources and essential foodstuffs; the social, economic, institutional and political impact; and the nuclear safety issues linked with the remaining term of operation of the Chernobyl units and the stabilization of the existing sarcophagus. The Conference resulted in recommendations for future activities and its findings have been widely disseminated.

5. In April 1996, the United Nations Coordinator of International Cooperation on Chernobyl, attended a two-day round-table meeting at Kiev, together with the ministers from Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine responsible for Chernobyl matters. Attended also by representatives of United Nations agencies, several Western Governments and donor organizations, the meeting focused on the rehabilitation of the exclusion zone and the creation of an international research centre on nuclear safety at Chernobyl. The United Nations Coordinator also chaired a meeting of the Quadripartite Ministerial-level Committee for Coordination on Chernobyl at United Nations Headquarters on 6 December 1996, which considered ways to revitalize the efforts of the international community

to address the consequences of the catastrophe beyond the tenth anniversary commemoration.

6. It was agreed that a United Nations inter-agency assessment mission, led by the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, should be sent to areas of the three countries most affected by the accident in order to determine current needs with regard to continued assistance by the international community. At the meeting, the Government of the Netherlands announced a pledge of 1 million guilders towards projects for the victims of the Chernobyl accident in the three countries.

III. UNITED NATIONS INTER-AGENCY NEEDS ASSESSMENT MISSION TO AREAS OF BELARUS, THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND UKRAINE AFFECTED BY THE CHERNOBYL ACCIDENT, 20-26 MAY 1997

7. The inter-agency needs assessment team was composed of representatives of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), IAEA, WHO, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Department of Humanitarian Affairs and of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). The United Nations/United Nations Development Programme offices at Kiev, Minsk and Moscow were actively involved in the preparatory steps and participated in meetings with the national authorities. The mission examined problems resulting directly or indirectly from the Chernobyl accident. It was not, however, mandated to address issues of nuclear safety, on-site problems or those of the sarcophagus, or general economic issues. The mission focused on balancing real radiological risks against economic, social and psychological problems, and generating together with the authorities of the concerned countries realistic projects with a high likelihood of success, leading to measurable improvements in the current conditions under which the population was living.

8. The team's appraisal of the situation in the three countries underscored the need for further substantial assistance in the following main programme areas:

(a) Health. Further assistance is necessary to strengthen health-monitoring activities at the local, regional and national levels. An increased incidence of thyroid cancer, and of leukaemia to a certain degree, was reported. Thyroid cancers, for example, have already increased 285 times over pre-Chernobyl levels and are not expected to peak until the period 2005-2010. Increased incidence of other cancers that have long incubation periods can also be linked to the disaster, although these links have not yet been substantiated. Recovery workers or liquidators, however, have already experienced higher morbidity rates. Similarly, illness rates among the inhabitants of mildly contaminated areas are higher than those of the overall population. Intensive specialized medical care is required for the population which was exposed to radiation and for those who are living in contaminated areas. This includes the acquisition of equipment for hospitals and the delivery of mobile stations for permanent diagnostic control of the population living in contaminated regions.

Special activities are required for the registration and continued medical treatment of the liquidators in the three countries concerned;

(b) Socio-psychological rehabilitation. The socio-psychological rehabilitation of the effected population is a priority area requiring increased and more intensive activities in all three countries. The nature and seriousness of the psychological distress that has emerged, and its impact on people's physical health, are striking. Beyond the fear, hopelessness and social withdrawal which are the most frequent and visible consequences, numerous non-specific pathologies, such as asthenia, headaches, anorexia, depression and so forth, which, although not specifically caused by radiation, relate closely to the impact of confined living conditions resulting from caesium contamination of residential areas, are also frequent, in particular among displaced persons. It is proposed to strengthen existing socio-psychological centres and to create new ones with extended terms of reference, in order to generate initiatives in the economic field, at the local level;

(c) Environment. A number of environmental issues also deserve serious attention, in view of their ongoing and long-term threat to the health of the population. Issues in this sector include radiation protection, decontamination measures, agricultural and forestry issues, and contamination of water resources. In a nuclear disaster, it is not just the immediate damage inflicted that is of concern. A contaminated environment is a reservoir of future health risks and stifled economic productivity. Radioactivity entering the food chain and water systems will remain a serious problem in the coming decades, and is unlikely to restrict itself geographically. Recently, fish as far afield as Hungary were found to contain unacceptable levels of radiation, the origin of which was almost certainly Chernobyl. Clean food production and control of radionuclide contamination is an immediate and obvious concern. There are several notable problems associated with the forest industry, including the safe management of radioactive forests and forest products and the problems of people living in and around forests. Issues that need to be addressed also include ensuring worker safety, reducing the risk of forest fires and controlling the consumption of wild forest foods;

(d) Socio-economic questions. Emphasis was placed on employment problems, and on the need to create commercial and investment possibilities in view of the deployment of economic activities away from the affected areas. Efforts in this area must include the creation of commercial infrastructure, and the promotion of small and medium-sized enterprises and entrepreneurship skills, such as through business incubator facilities. Investment promotion should be supported by appropriate legislative acts;

(e) Information. Finally, the mission team received many indications of the need to review the information policies of the countries concerned in order to create trust and to communicate better with the population regarding the effects of the accident on their health and its impact on their daily lives, as well as to involve them more in the development of future plans and actions of the authorities and of the international community. The United Nations, with support from Governments, can assist in developing a new information policy.

9. The members of the mission team evaluated project proposals received during the mission and selected a number of projects. These projects will be presented for consideration at an international conference on Chernobyl in November 1997.

IV. INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE TO COUNTER THE DISASTER AND RELEVANT COORDINATION AND IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES TAKEN BY THE UNITED NATIONS DURING 1996-1997

10. The Department of Humanitarian Affairs has continued to maintain close cooperation with funds, programmes and agencies of the United Nations system and with regional and other relevant organizations working on Chernobyl matters. Many have undertaken specific actions and projects concerning Chernobyl, and where funds are available, are continuing or intensifying their efforts on the basis of the United Nations needs assessment mission.

11. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has reported that a new socio-psychological rehabilitation centre is being established at Gagarin, Smolensk Oblast, Russian Federation, as a result of the additional contributions made by the Government of the Netherlands. There are now 10 such centres in the three affected countries.

12. The United Nations Children's Fund has prepared a new action plan which will cover the iodine deficiencies of the population, provide support to several national non-governmental organizations and will also address the reform of the health systems in the three countries, as well as social and psychological actions for the population.

13. The World Health Organization is preparing the implementation of a follow-up programme to the International Programme on the Health Effects of the Chernobyl Accident, which will include a thyroid project, an accident recovery workers project, a study on dose reconstruction, and research on socio-psychological effects. Subsequent to the United Nations needs assessment mission, a regional project has also been conceived. The World Health Organization has received a substantial contribution towards this new project, under the Netherlands grant.

14. On the basis of the findings of the United Nations assessment mission, UNIDO has stressed that a new economic development strategy is required to assist the population in revitalizing economic activities. Institutional support is necessary in order to extend the activities of economic development agencies into communities and to create favourable legal conditions for promoting locally available raw materials and agricultural resources. The Organization has reiterated its willingness to apply its expertise in this field should funds be made available.

15. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations reported that some 1.4 million hectares in Belarus are still unsuitable for food production as a result of caesium-137 and strontium-90 contamination. The country must import almost all of its required lubricant and fuel oils, and FAO proposes an alternative use of that land by growing oilseeds for the production of lubricants and possibly biofuels. Studies have shown that oil from rapeseed

grown in these areas is essentially free of radionuclides and suitable activities were selected in field trials. Plans for an operational plant for the production of a chainsaw lubricant are being prepared; the lubricant should be test marketed in late 1997. In Ukraine, FAO has begun advising on ways to reduce the internal radiation exposure of the population through the effective control and reduction of radionuclides in dairy products, with a main activity focusing around a milk-processing plant 80 kilometres west of Chernobyl. The United States of America has financed, bilaterally, the installation of a process for removing Cs-137 and Sr-90 from milk. In cooperation with IAEA, FAO will develop a manual of detailed procedures for the implementation of countermeasures in agriculture and related industries in the event of radionuclide contamination.

16. The United Nations Environment Programme has emphasized the need for appropriate management and sustainable use of radiation-polluted forests. Over six million hectares of forests are considered contaminated, leading to restrictions on forest operations and the use of wood. Forests may also be a source of secondary contamination of other areas when forest fires occur. The most pressing problem in all three affected countries is the maintenance of those forests in a stable condition, and to this end an efficient technology for reforestation and cultivation must be elaborated, together with a long-term management strategy allowing a maximum economic, social and ecological contribution to society. This appraisal of the situation and of future action is shared by the Economic Commission for Europe which has cooperated with UNEP in the preparation of a new regional project on forest management as a follow-up to the United Nations assessment mission.

17. The International Atomic Energy Agency is continuing its activities and studies in such key areas as: creation of an international nuclear information system; problems of migration of radionuclide contaminants in soils, forests and lakes; training for the safe operation and management of nuclear power plants; radiation monitoring and protection and radioactive waste management; and reduction of internal radiation doses to the population. It is also preparing a software package on the management of contaminated forests and forestry products.

18. The United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation is evaluating the effect of exposure and the health of local populations and will review, along with epidemiological results, the doses received by individuals at the time of the accident and in subsequent years. The next report of the Committee is expected in 2000.

19. The activities of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) centre around regional and global arrangements for the provision of products for environmental emergency response in the event of future nuclear incidents.

20. The World Bank is involved in lending programmes for the development of new energies through the promotion of conventional power generation.

21. In addition to organizations of the United Nations system, a number of other entities are also actively working on Chernobyl matters, mostly focusing on issues of nuclear safety.

22. The activities of the European Commission are principally handled by its Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) programme and focus on nuclear safety issues, providing assistance in the upgrading of nuclear reactors in the region and improving the safety culture in all sectors of civilian use of nuclear energy. The closure of the Chernobyl plant requires new efforts towards the reform of the energy sector as a whole in Ukraine. Technical work is being conducted to assess the technological and financial implications, as well as the social impact of the closure, in particular for the town of Slavutich. Work on a new reactor enclosure, the decommissioning of the remaining reactor units, measures to cope with radioactive waste and other subjects are also under study. Other important activities include studies on the health, genetic and environmental impacts of radioactive contamination. In particular, studies of thyroid cancer and other disorders in countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States affected by the Chernobyl accident have been initiated. The TACIS programme has also launched a study programme on measures to improve public information in the Chernobyl-affected regions.

23. Based on a memorandum of understanding signed by the Government of Ukraine, the Group of Seven and the European Union in December 1995, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) is also involved in preparations leading to the decommissioning of the plant and to other nuclear safety measures at Chernobyl. Funds to be made available for these purposes amount to US$ 350 million. They are shared among the Nuclear Safety Account of EBRD, the TACIS programme and other bilateral donors. The Nuclear Safety Account has announced that a first grant of 118 million European currency units will be made to the Ukrainian authorities. This grant comprises the provision of an interim spent-fuel facility to permit the safe storage of spent-fuel assemblies, the provision of a liquid radioactive waste-treatment facility and safety measures for Unit 3 for the implementation of safety improvements prior to closure. According to further information from the Nuclear Safety Account, it was agreed at the Denver Summit of Eight that an additional US$ 735 million would be allocated for measures concerning the safety of the sarcophagus.

24. The Nuclear Energy Agency of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has reported on its studies and publications of the impact of the accident, on population exposure and potential risks still existing and on environmental and agricultural consequences. Other issues addressed are radiation protection infrastructures and emergency preparedness.

25. Appeals have been launched by IFRC for increasing the number of screenings by ultrasound of thyroid cancer in children, by using mobile diagnosis laboratories. Further planned action includes the monitoring of gamma radiation in the most affected areas, and the distribution of milk powder and micro-nutrients. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies plans to develop, in cooperation with UNESCO, a socio-psychological programme for affected communities. A grant from the contribution of the Government of the Netherlands, which was channelled by the Department of Humanitarian Affairs through the United Nations Chernobyl Trust Fund, has been provided to IFRC.

V. INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON THE THEME "CHERNOBYL AND BEYOND: HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE TO VICTIMS OF TECHNOLOGICAL DISASTERS"

26. In May 1997, the Department of Humanitarian Affairs organized, in cooperation with the Government of the Russian Federation, an international seminar on the theme "Chernobyl and beyond: humanitarian assistance to victims of technological disasters". Participants included representatives of Governments, international organizations and the media, as well as scientists, lawyers and academics. Drawing on the experiences of Chernobyl and a number of other technological disasters, the seminar resulted in recommendations relevant to the overall strategy of assistance on Chernobyl. It also outlined a methodology for addressing the life cycle of technological disasters, ranging from risk reduction and prevention measures and assessing the specific needs of those affected when a disaster strikes, to the response itself and its effective coordination. A comprehensive report on the seminar is being widely disseminated.

27. With regard to Chernobyl, the seminar recommended a shift in perspective towards strengthening primary health care in the affected regions and improving the prevention, detection and treatment of illnesses, regardless of whether they are directly attributable to radiation, a finding which was strongly supported by the inter-agency assessment team. This means that assistance should not be delayed by the desire for a clear-cut aetiology when faced with the distinct problem of a severely declining quality of life for vast numbers of people. The fact that technology is at the root of the disaster does not make their suffering any more abstract.

28. The seminar also recognized the dominant role that non-governmental organizations play in providing humanitarian assistance to the victims of Chernobyl and recommended that recipient Governments strengthen their direct contacts with non-governmental organizations, and exempt them from tax and other administrative obstacles. The study of the applicability of international insurance schemes to compensate potential victims in the event of nuclear accidents, as well as important legislation to help minimize their likelihood, were the subject of other recommendations.

29. With regard to economic problems, recommendations emphasized the need for self-sustaining mechanisms and outlined ways for the specific involvement of the private sector in economic rehabilitation. It was also recommended that the socio-psychological rehabilitation centres create business incubators to cultivate self-reliance and entrepreneurial skills.

VI. PROJECTS FOR CHERNOBYL-RELATED RELIEF ACTIVITIES FOR THE SECOND DECADE

30. In the light of the findings of the United Nations inter-agency needs assessment mission, many of which were reinforced by the outcome of the above-mentioned seminar, the Department of Humanitarian Affairs has, in close cooperation with the competent authorities of Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine, evaluated project proposals received during or subsequent to the

mission. During selection, emphasis was placed on the need for clear objectives, identifying the counterparts involved and the precise financial requirements and, where possible, on regionally-oriented projects.

31. On that basis, approximately 40 project proposals were selected in the following main sectors of activity:

(a) Minimization of the health consequences of the accident, including one project relating to the recovery workers (15 projects);

(b) Socio-psychological rehabilitation (8 projects);

(c) Environmental issues, including forest activities in the three countries, and agriculture (10 projects);

(d) Economic rehabilitation of the affected areas (12 projects);

(e) New information strategy, a regional project covering the three countries.

32. Wherever possible, references have been included in the project descriptions to previous activities undertaken in the area and to the results achieved. Donor institutions potentially interested in funding the new activities have also been flagged.

33. At the meeting of the Quadripartite Ministerial-level Committee for Coordination on Chernobyl held on 6 December 1996, it was agreed that these project proposals would be the focus of an international conference on Chernobyl to which Governments, funding institutions, international organizations, other governmental or non-governmental organizations and United Nations agencies would be invited. The conference would be held to coincide with the consideration of the item on Chernobyl by the General Assembly, at its fifty-second session. Together, these projects form an inter-agency programme of international assistance to Chernobyl-affected areas, constituting an appeal to the international community for continued assistance to the affected populations of Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine for the second decade after the Chernobyl catastrophe.

VII. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

34. It is hoped that the international community will respond promptly and generously to this new appeal and pledge cash and/or in-kind contributions, whether to the United Nations Trust Fund for Chernobyl, directly to implementing agencies or on a bilateral basis, in order to ensure the fullest possible implementation of the proposed programme to mitigate the many lingering effects of the Chernobyl disaster. The various projects, most of which call for a relatively modest level of funding, would help bring quick and tangible relief to the many people who have been afflicted by the Chernobyl disaster in various ways. Some of the projects are also intended to help reduce the grave risks posed to future generations in the region. Most significantly, the implementation of the programme would translate into positive action the resolve and commitment expressed in so many United Nations resolutions on Chernobyl but, most regrettably, remaining until now, largely unfulfilled.